



# The Human Services Workforce Initiative

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

## *Voices and Choices:*

*Illinois Youth Work Professionals Discuss  
Opportunities, Challenges, and Options for the Profession*



Prepared by  
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On behalf of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition for Cornerstones for Kids

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Opportunities, Challenges, and Options for the Profession

*By Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom & Nicole Yohalem  
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## Acknowledgements

Jennifer Becker-Mouhcine of the Illinois Center for Violence Prevention was instrumental in both generating the idea to do this work as well as orchestrating data collection across the state.

This research was funded by Cornerstones for Kids. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Cornerstones for Kids.

This report is one of a series of briefs being developed by the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition about the youth work workforce. The Coalition brings together individuals and organizations dedicated to developing a strong, diverse youth work workforce that is stable, prepared, supported, and committed to the wellbeing and empowerment of young people. The research briefs are available on the Cornerstones for Kids Web site, [www.cornerstones4kids.org](http://www.cornerstones4kids.org).

# Youth Worker Voices and Choices: Illinois Youth Workers Discuss Opportunities, Challenges, and Options in the Profession

## Research Brief

This brief offers highlights from a qualitative study of frontline youth work professionals in Illinois, *Youth Worker Voices and Choices: Illinois Youth Workers Discuss Opportunities, Challenges and Options in the Profession*, developed by the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition in partnership with the Illinois After-School Partnership at the Illinois Center for Violence Prevention (ICVP). The report summarizes themes from eight focus groups that engaged 83 Illinois youth workers from both rural and urban localities around the state.

If we were to choose one statement from the focus groups to sum up the state of the youth field from the perspective of Illinois workers, it might be this one, from a young Chicago-based professional: “I’m starting to see all of the advances that youth work is making. But I didn’t realize when I got into this position that I was a youth worker and that it was youth development that I was doing.”

Youth work has advanced over the past several decades. The profession has changed and is continuing to take shape: new professional networks have formed; real career ladders—while still shaky—are beginning to be built; and new funding streams recognize the need for a workforce that focuses on the non-school hours.

And yet youth work is not well known among the general public, and is apparently even less understood. Unlike teaching or practicing law, it is entirely possible to enter the field and not even know it—to know that it has a name, let alone a professional identity. The profession remains dangerously undefined relative to others.

“[Youth work] was really not anything that I thought, gee, I wanted to do this when I was a kid, but it all kind of fell into my lap. I love it, and it’s not something that I even asked for.”

It is for these reasons that ICVP and the Forum, on behalf of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition—a national coalition of individuals and organizations committed to strengthening the workforce—undertook this effort and focused our collective energy on better understanding the youth work profession. The purpose of this study was to get youth workers talking about who they are, how they are (or are not) supported in the workplace, and what it will take to attract, develop, and sustain them and their colleagues into the future. It should be noted that this effort is part of a series of efforts both nationally and in several areas around the country to capture and document the frontline youth worker workforce.

Each of the eight focus groups, while engaging different demographic slices of the workforce, addressed the same four basic questions:

- What brought you to this work and why?
- How supported do you feel in your job?
- What keeps you in this work?
- What is needed for youth work to be a strong and valued profession?

Here we lay out the most common themes that emerged in response to these questions—including a discussion about motivation to enter the field; youth worker preparation, what workers need to

feel supported, career and professional challenges, and factors influencing decisions to stay in or leave the field.

## Entry Points and Motivation

The first question participants were asked was, “What brought you to this work?” As participants told their stories, two basic themes quickly emerged. Youth workers tended to fall into one of two groups of individuals: those we will call “intentionals,” and those who happened upon youth work—the “accidentals.”

“Intentionals” tended to have a strong sense early on that working with young people was something they always wanted to do. Inspired by a passion for young people, a deep identification with and concern for a particular community, or a singularly-focused drive to improve things for future generations, “intentionals” comprise a highly dedicated workforce.

A greater proportion of focus group discussants—while no less dedicated, as the discussions quickly revealed—fell into the second category, which we call “accidentals.” The majority of focus group participants told a story that suggests they stumbled upon youth work. These “accidentals” often cited volunteer or summer work as the route through which a career was forged.

“I was a secretary for 16 years, and I was talking to a friend of mine and telling her I wanted to go into another field. I said, ‘I’m tired of pushing papers, and I want to do something for somebody. I want to make a difference.’”

Among both groups, motivation to join the youth work profession can be summed up simply as the desire to make a difference. For most individuals, working with the younger generation provided a specific focus for directing those energies.

*Listening carefully to youth worker entry points provides solid grounding for developing future organizational and public policies.* The focus group data suggest that youth workers value the fact that the profession has a range of entry points. Volunteerism and internship/part-time work experiences in college appear to naturally yield particularly fruitful attachments to the work and often inspire a decision to make youth work a life-long vocation.

## Preparation

Whether formally trained in a related field, such as education or social work, or recruited from the volunteer ranks or even the streets, youth workers generally reported feeling unprepared for at least some aspects of their work. Once on the job, however, most reported becoming “quick studies” on what is needed to do the work, further reporting that learning the job is part “trial by fire,” part co-worker support, and part access to ongoing training, professional development, and supervision.

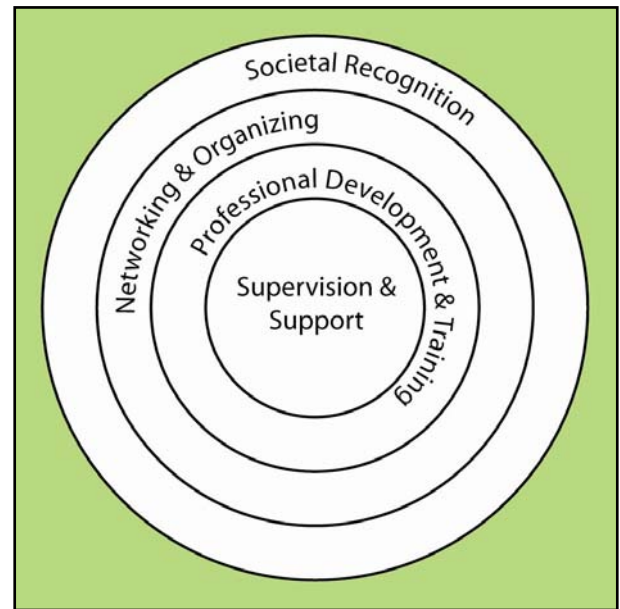
The preparation (and ongoing support) issue raises the old chicken-and-egg question, Are good youth workers born or made? Youth work involves both habits of mind and standards of practice, as well as just plain instinct and heart. Focus group participants discussed two aspects of preparation and the role of each in developing youth workers: those a youth worker can actually prepare for through pre-service training and formal professional development and those that no one can really prepare a worker for that are more about passion and purpose.

*Youth worker preparation models—both pre-service and ongoing—should square with the realities of the field, focus group discussants repeatedly cautioned. Focus group data suggest that effective models include information about practical concerns like behavioral and classroom management, as well as youth development, are example-based rather than prescriptive, move workers beyond basic frameworks for working with youth, and provide peer-based opportunities to learn and share.*

## Supports

In the focus groups, youth workers were asked to talk about the level and types of support they receive on the job. In analyzing comments made by participants about supports, four general categories emerged, including

- **Supervision and support:** The majority of focus group participants reported having a supportive working relationship with their supervisor. A smaller but still significant group stated that their supervisors were largely unsupportive. *The quality and nature of the supervisory role can “make or break” the working experience of frontline youth workers.*
- **Professional development & training:** Though not considered a panacea, professional development and training were seen as valuable supports for frontline youth workers. Those employed by the local affiliate of a national organization or a government agency appeared to have greater access to training opportunities and resources than those working in independent agencies. *Whether working within a relatively resource-rich system or an independent agency with no in-house training unit, youth workers emphatically stated the need for appropriate, ongoing professional development opportunities.*
- **Networking & organizing:** Across focus groups, when asked what would help them feel more supported, participants talked about having some kind of organization charged with advocating on behalf of youth work professionals and helping to connect them to one another. *The connections youth workers seek involve not only networking amongst themselves, but also connecting to other resources related to professional and life management goals—resources that many believe would help more individuals remain in the field.*
- **Societal recognition:** The fourth layer of support youth workers seek relates to broader recognition of the field and a shift in how the work is perceived in society at large. There was a strong sentiment among youth workers that the profession is undervalued and not well known.



"I think a lot of times people don't realize what we do. They think that I just have the easiest job ever—that I just go and play with a bunch of kids for three hours and get paid for it."



*Focus group participants felt this affects the field's ability to explain youth work to the community and funders alike and hurts its ability to advance.*

## Compensation

Workers felt compensation rates do not reflect the value of the work, yet they enjoyed their jobs and considered them more fulfilling than better-compensated options. The pay issue was a source of internal tension for many who question, to varying degrees, the feasibility of staying in the field long-term. Three issues emerged when youth workers discussed compensation:

- *Participants believed their wages will remain essentially flat regardless of how long they remain in the field.* Many talked about being okay with a low starting wage, but wished the field did a better job of calibrating wage increases to years of service and rewarding longevity.
- *Hourly workers were seen as particularly poorly paid and, in some cases, poorly treated.* This was an issue of social justice, discussed at length by several youth workers (both salaried and hourly).
- *Benefits appeared to either be adequate or lousy to non-existent.* While a fair share of the benefits picture in youth work can be explained by the large percentage of part-time workers, lack of access to adequate benefits was a concern for many.

"This is a rewarding career. And I think more people would choose this profession if it was more stable and paid more."

## Professional Stresses and Challenges

Lack of job security, staff turnover, and difficulty achieving work-life balance all contribute to the stress many youth workers experience. Stress is one of the factors that, along with compensation, determines whether individuals remain in the field long-term. Decisions to stay or leave the field come with a bit of turmoil for many. Because these are common concerns across youth work settings, focus group discussants suggested more attention be paid to the structural reasons underlying these challenges.

Many focus group participants were attempting to build the next rung of their career ladder because they wanted to stay in the field. Building a strong, vibrant youth work profession was of primary concern to these invested individuals. Factors they identified that would move the profession forward include

- **Flexible and creative recruitment:** There are a range of entry points into the profession. Recruiting the future workforce with this in mind may open up options for intentional growth of the field.
- **Incentives for both early career and experienced workers:** Incentives need to be developed for recruiting and developing younger youth workers as well as attracting mid-career professionals from other fields and retaining seasoned youth workers.

"I see it being a career. I think one thing is getting other people to see it as a career. You know, we are not halfway between babysitters and teachers. There's a whole different role [in this work]. And it's important work."

- **Compensation that rewards longevity:** Youth workers suggested more should be done to reward longevity in the field. Focus group participants were consistent in noting that addressing compensation is important to reducing turnover.
- **Stable career ladders and expanded opportunities:** The rungs of the career ladder for youth workers are shaky at best. Expanding opportunities for networking and training and offering credentialing programs that align with the realities of the field are important strategies.
- **Membership and recognition:** Participants raised the need for an organizational entity of some kind charged with both supporting employee needs on the job and also promoting broader advocacy efforts for the profession, including public awareness campaigns about the profession and its contributions to society.